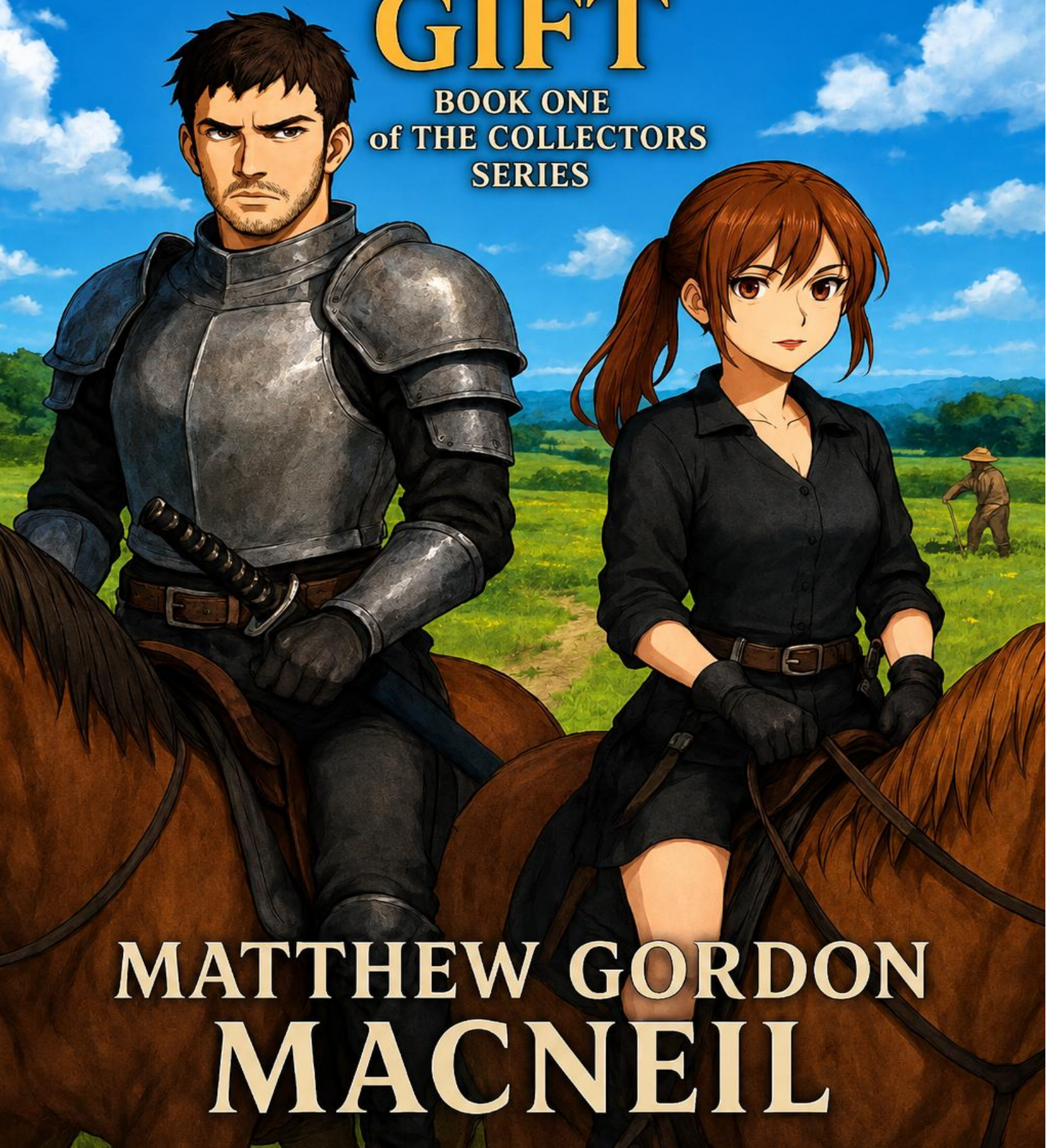
THE NECROMANCER'S GIFT

BOOK ONE
of THE COLLECTORS
SERIES



MATTHEW GORDON
MACNEIL

The Necromancer's Gift

By Matthew Gordon MacNeil

Chapter 1

The man, flanked by two Knights in heavy plate armour, made his way across the grounds from his cell, his demeanor giving away his mood.

They shepherded him through the throng of people, their beady eyes watching him as he went. Hatred, anger, and fear

ruling them.

Sheep. Nothing but sheep, he shook his head in disgust.

He wasn't even guilty and here they were, eager to watch him hang like a pig on a hook, all due to the mob mentality notion of 'guilty until proven innocent."

His handlers prodded him with iron rods, their sadistic, happy smiles having been plastered on their stupid faces for weeks.

"Our little killer,"

They dubbed him out of ignorance.

"Little murderer."

And when he protested he wasn't a killer, that that he came across the Lady Julianna dead on the roadside, they laughed, punching and kicking him harder calling him a liar.

A goddamm liar.

At this point he was ready to leave this world and prayed the next would be better with the Gods.

A woman jeered at him as he past, her pudgy face shriveled up in what he assumed was anger but could've easily been because she ate a sour fruit.

The man beside her, bald with a white moustache, strange markings on his head, was the only one who gave him a

sympathetic look.

"Don't look so glum old man,"

He smirked,

"Its me they'll hang. Not you."

"Innocent men shouldn't die."

"What? What did you say?"

He demanded, but the older man didn't respond, his grey-blue eyes looking at him sadly as the guards dragged him towards the scaffold.

The hangman, a female Dwarf, gave him a cold once over and gestured for the guards to stand him near the noose.

He scanned the crowd, noted their expressions.

Like he thought before, all eager to watch him die.

Die for nothing.

Fools.

One of the guards placed the rope round his neck.

"Any last words?"

The Dwarf asked.

He laughed.

"Yeah. You can all kiss my ass! You idiots have no idea who the killer is, you just wanna see blood! You dumb motherfu----"

The floor gave way underneath him. He dropped so fast he barely had time to register what happened.

He dangled there, feeling the rope tighten against his neck, choking off his airway.

He thought his neck would snap cleanly, that he wouldn't feel a thing.

Instead he thrashed, instinct kicking in to prevent him from dying, little good it did.

His tongue popped out, flailing as wildly as his other body parts. He started to gag, eyes watering.

With tears running down his cheeks he fought for a final breath, hands gripping at empty air until all the strength left his body.

"Take his body after they throw it away,"

Lorkin ordered his apprentice.

"Bring it back to my study."

"But why? He's dead."

"Yes, but his soul is still hovering around. I placed a spell on it to keep it earth bound for awhile."

"Master Belus won't be pleased."

The old man glanced at the apprentice,

"He doesn't need to know, does he?"

"No, Master."

"The man was innocent, Kyden. He didn't deserve what this mob put him through, so please, retrieve his body when you can."

The old Mage threw up his beige hood and retreated through the crowd of onlookers, all still eagerly watching the lifeless body swing.

Kyden returned his gaze to the man, wondering why his master wanted to help someone such as he. Even if he wasn't guilty, he was no one. Just another nameless street urchin in the Kingdom.

But, Kyden was a loyal apprentice, even if he didn't understand his master's reasoning, so he waited.

And he waited.

When nightfall came, the guards finally approached the scaffold to take the body down, laughing and joking as they

did it.

One, the same man who put the noose around the convict's neck, mockingly waved his arms about like the man did during his final moments, finding it just about the most hilarious thing he ever seen.

"Leave it to royal dogs to mock the dead."

Kyden spit in disgust.

He'd enjoy this.

Drawing his twin daggers, Hichimaryu and Kagamaryu, named in honour of old friends now long dead, the apprentice Mage sprang into action.

Rushing out of the darkness he swerved under one of the guards going for a quick strike, driving Hichimaryu into his chest, hitting his heart.

As he dropped Kyden moved onto his friend, the mocking one, who let out a yelp for aid but it did little good, Kagamaryu burying itself deep in his left eye, blood and white matter spraying Kyden.

"Not so funny now is it?"

He whispered pulling out the blade.

Cutting down and catching the body Kyden sheathed his

daggers, body wincing under the weight.

"Jeez,"

He grunted,

"What the hell did you eat in your life mate?"

Kyden slowly made his way from the town market down an old alleyway, passing several homeless who barely glanced up as he past, their minds on their own poor condition.

He had been one of them once, back before his master took him in and started training him in the use of Magic and tending animals.

A son of a prostitute and one of her clients, Kyden Mareus was luckier than most and he knew it, but still he found it hard to find compassion for those less fortunate.

Life was harsh. Unfair to all but the rich, so why should he care what happened to others so long as he was provided for?

His master hated this outlook on life and never shied away from letting him know it. But so what? The truth doesn't care for fancy lies.

Still, he did his master's bidding, so here he was lugging a heavy bastard through the grimy streets of Vividian, one of the poorest cities in all of Sentinel.

"Lucky you, mister hanged one,"

Kyden said reaching his master's apartment,

"You caught the attention of a foolish but good man."

Fidgeting with the lock Kyden opened the door and went in, immediately struck by the smell of potions, strong, potent things that made your hair stand on end and cause the gag reflexes to go into overdrive.

But he was used to it by now so they had little affect.

"I'm home. I got the body."

"Bring him down."

Following instructions Kyden took the body down into the cellar where his master set up his laboratory.

A messy place, with test tubes and dozens of spell books lying around collecting dust, some dog eared, others almost completely crumbled to dust.

Lorkin Valis was not known to be a tidy man.

"Place him in the chair Kyden."

The elder patted the leather seat and he did as instructed, plopping the dead man down, his eyes staring blankly at the cellar celling.

"I still don't know why you wanna save him."

Kyden admitted pulling up a stool.

"You always question my judgement."

Lorkin mumbled.

"As any critically thinking human should."

"Eh?"

"I mean everyone should think critically about things. Whether they be asked by one's master or not."

"Ah, true, true."

Lorkin hooked up cables to the man's arms and placed a metal crown on his forehead, energy beginning to course through the cables.

"Uh....you're going to shock him back to life?"

"No....Well, not exactly."

Lorkin stepped back, hands forming 'pistol' signs.

"I'm going to shoot him with Magic to place his soul back inside his body, and use the cables and crown to kick start his heart."

"Riiiight."

"It'll work. Watch."

Kyden didn't say anything. He just focused on his master, the

old man's features brightening, so happy to be 'experimenting' as he called it.

The Magic 'shooting' came soon after. Bolts of purplish and blue zapped the dead man, causing lines of energy to appear on his face and arms.

He did not stir.

"Oh drat it all!"

Lorkin continued to fire, cursing up a storm.

"Master...."

Lorkin, caught up in his experiment, wasn't listening.

"Master..."

"Why won't you work? You blasted thing! WORK!"

"Master..."

'WHAT?"

Kyden pointed to the control switch beside the chair.

"You forgot to turn it on."

"Oh!"

The old man scrambled to it, flicking it on, the cables flaring to life.

"There we go, ha ha!"

"You're clueless."

"What was that my boy?"

"Nothing."

Lorkin quickly lost himself in his work again, weaving the same spells but this time they actually had an effect, spreading across the corpse in dazzling lights.

And the body started rising.

Soon the man's eyes opened. He took in a mouthful of air, hands reaching for his throat.

Kyden couldn't believe it.

His master did it!

"See, my boy!"

Lorkin pointed, jumping for joy,

"I told ya I had the Magic to do this."

"You did. Now what?"

Lorkin's focus went back to the man, who was clutching the sides of the chair, eyes darting from master to apprentice and back again.

"Who are you?"

His voice sounded hoarse, but considering he had just been dangling from a rope, Kyden didn't expect differently.

"Easy,"

Lorkin said,

"Its all right. Everything is fine."

"Who. Are. You?"

"Remember. We spoke before you stepped on the scaffold?"

Kyden watched the man's face change from scared and surprised to an expression of recognition.

"The old man."

"Yes, that's me. I'm Lorkin Valis. And this,"

Lorkin jabbed a thumb at Kyden,

"Is my apprentice Kyden Mareus. We rescued your corpse."

"My....corpse?"

"You were dead."

Lorkin said bluntly,

"Left to rot too. If not for us you'd be in a mass grave right now."

"I was entering a palace."

The man said,

"A woman was guiding me in....then I woke up here."

"Hella,"

Lorkin nodded,

"The Goddess of Death who guides souls to their eternal rest. Sorry we had to disturb that."

"Why did you?"

The man rubbed his neck, flinching at the bruising.

"No innocent man deserves to die like that. Lady Julianna Bray was killed by an animal. An autopsy confirmed it, but for appearances sake the court decided to try and execute you to placate the public."

"They hanged me for their image?"

"Basically yes."

"What's your name anyway?"

Kyden asked.

"They never bothered mentioning it."

"I...I can't remember."

"Huh? But you can remember everything else?"

"No...Only bits. I remember Juliana. My trial. But only in hazy pieces. Before that...nothing."

"What the hell?"

Kyden glared at Lorkin.

"You said he'd be fine. What's this?"

"i don't know. Its not supposed to be like this."

"You erased most of his memories!"

"I didn't mean too."

"He can't even remember his name!"

Lorkin threw his hands up, not understanding how things could go like this.

Kyden rolled his eyes. His master could be incompetent at times, but he was the smartest and most capable Mage he knew.

So how could he possibly screw this up?

"He's gonna need a name."

Kyden pointed out after he calmed down.

"And he can't stay here."

"You name him."

Lorkin tossed the issue to him like it was just another part of his training.

Kyden glared at him again.

"Jeez, he's not a dog."

He rubbed his forehead, fingerless gloves obscuring his vision for a moment.

"How about....Vividian?"

"Like our street?"

"Never said it would be perfect master. Vividian Cassender. What do you think mate?"

The man nodded, admitting he didn't much care so long as the name didn't make him sound like an idiot.

"Now that that's out of the way,"

Kyden stood up,

"What'll he do? He can't stay here and we can't just send him off into the proverbial wilderness alone."

The elderly Mage put his wrinkly hands together, rubbing them gingerly and started walking around the room, scanning objects.

Kyden wished he hadn't said a damn thing.

Suddenly Lorkin reached out, gripping Vividian by his arm, smiling brightly,

"Tell me, how do you feel about becoming a Collector?"

"A what?"

"A Collector. A member of the Mages' Guild that specializes in retrieving items and equipment for the Mages. Its a highly lucrative trade."

"Its also highly dangerous. That's the part he's not telling you."

Kyden said, poking holes in the older man's excitement.

"Yes, yes, well anything worthwhile poses risks."

"No they don't."

"Don't contradict your elders!"

Lorkin patted Vividian's arm.

"So, what do you say?"

The man studied Lorkin's face, then Kyden.

He nodded,

"Sure. If it pays."

"You dumbass."

Kyden didn't even bother waiting for his orders, he knew what Lorkin's next command would be.

Chapter 2

Collectors, unlike what Lorkin said, weren't strictly members of the Mages Guild. It was true they were apart of it in a sense, but more like an auxiliary wing rather than full members.

Of course, Vividian only discovered this little fact AFTER he agreed to become Lorkin's collector, outfitting himself with a Katana and light plate armour the old man let him have.

The Mage's apprentice, Kyden, helped him into the armour, if begrudgingly. There wasn't much to be said about his attitude. The kid didn't like him but Vividian couldn't understand why.

Maybe he wronged him in his original life?

Maybe they were old rivals?

No, not that one. Kyden looked nineteen, twenty at best. Vividian was nearing thirty based on his looks, gruffy and

rugged, short dark brown hair and a small beard.

Whatever the issue with Kyden he didn't dwell on it, preferring to keep his mind on the present. He got a new chance at life after all, he better take full advantage of it.

Once he was into the armour and had the Katana's scabbard wrapped around his waist he returned to Lorkin, the old man rummaging through a trash heap in the corner of his laboratory.

"What're you looking for?"

"A piece of paper,"

He grunted, throwing odds and ends behind him, Kyden ducking from a few.

"You'll need a paper with my signature to enter the Guild building in Varnus. Can't just expect the guards to letcha walk right in now can ya?"

"Why don't you just go with him master?"

Lorkin looked at his apprentice, shaking his head in disapproval.

Kyden did it back mockingly.

"Why are you doing that to me?"

"To think, I raised you. Put food in your belly, taught you

Magic---"

"Oh here we go---"

"And what do I get for it? Such a disrespectful young man. One who questions my authority. Mocks my age. Its a shame really. I should've beaten you, shouldn't I have?"

"Like you coulda done it."

Vividian watched the two go back and forth in slight amusement. It was clear that Kyden, however 'disrespectful' he was being, cared greatly for Lorkin. The same was true for the old man.

Kyden, a feminine looking type, could've easily passed for a girl if Vividian didn't know better. His long chestnut colured hair was tied back in a ponytail, he wore lipstick, and a skirt, his blouse black.

"OK, OK master, just find the paper."

Kyden waved off the last of his belly aching and the Mage went back to digging, finding some paper soon afterward.

He wrote down his name and handed it to Vividian.

"Here you go lad. Hand this to the assistant at the Guild's main desk in Varnus and everything should be OK."

"You said to hand it to the guards,"

Kyden pointed out.

"Hand it to both jeesh! Off with you two now."

"Wait....you want me to go too?"

"Of course. How else will he get there?"

"But---"

"Just go. It'll do you good to get out of Sentinel for a few days."

"Master, please. I don't---"

"Kyden. Go."

There was no further argument about it. The apprentice scowled at Vividian momentarily before grabbing a bag near the door leading upstairs.

"C'mon then, undead man."

Then Kyden was gone.

Vividian turned to Lorkin,

"Is he always like this?"

"Only when he's in a mood."

"Great...."

Within half an hour the two were on the main road heading towards Varnus, neither saying much of anything, Kyden refusing to even look at his new traveling companion.

To Vividian it was weird. He couldn't remember anything about his former life but he sensed he was a talker, at least in certain circumstances, and he wanted to talk now, but he dared not bring up any topic less he piss off the kid.

The road, carved out long ago by unknown pioneers, was flanked by forest on either side, rabbits and other small animals being spotted from time to time.

Lorkin never specified how long it would take to reach Varnus and Vivdian didn't ask, so all he could do was hope it appeared on the road sooner rather than later.

"You can't recall anything at all?"

Kyden asked suddenly, turning slightly in the saddle to face him.

"Like I said. Bits here and there about my trial and execution but nothing of my past before. Why?"

"Wanted to know if you've ever been to Varnus."

"Maybe but can't be sure."

"Its a quiet town. A Dark Elf animage runs the branch of the Guild there."

"Animage?"

"A Mage capable of communicating with animals."

"What type of Mage are you?"

To this he scrunched up his nose.

"Wouldn't you like to know."

"That's why I asked."

"I'm trained in illusion Magic. I know a few elemental spells too."

"That could come in handy. Say, what kind of items does your master want?"

Kyden reached back and tucked his ponytail into his blouse.

"Soul Gems. Artifacts from ancient days. Spell books. The Guild offers quests for such things."

"Quests?"

"Yup. Quests. When scouts, non Mage workers for the Guild, find new locations that contain items, they send the details in and quests are commissioned."

"Do collectors compete in these quests?"

"Not usually. Most of the time its whoever gets the quest card first who gets to explore the location. But on occasion the

Guild sponsors contests to see who can collect the most in a single spot."

It all sounded a bit complex to Vivdian. Not complex in the sense he couldn't comprehend it, but more so that it was all so tightly organized needlessly.

Regardless there was cash in it so he was willing to give it a try, better than stumbling around without a plan anyway.

Two days later the two finally left the forest and hit the Rudian plains, lush farming country that stretched on for miles, just as big, if not more so, than the forest.

That night they set up camp near a small lake, Kyden insisting on it as he wished to fish for supper, refusing to eat the nuts and grains Lorkin sent with them a third time in a row.

Vivdian set to work starting a fire while his companion fished, having little luck. He heard him snapping unsavory words to the fish.

"You won't win any fans that way."

He joked.

"Shut up."

Eventually he caught two averaged size fish, handing them over to Vivdian to skin and cook, which he did reluctantly, unsure he could do it.

But, he thanked his lucky stars, he managed to see it through without any mishaps and the two sat down to a pleasant meal.

Or, the best one could hope for with someone as grumpy as Kyden beside you.

They ate in silence, any attempts at conversation swatted down by the apprentice.

Unable to handle it after thirty minutes Vividian asked the question most pressing on his mind, not caring how the kid reacted.

"Why do you dress like that?"

"HUH?'

"You're a guy right? So why do you dress like a woman? I barely was able to tell the difference. If Lorkin hadn't tipped me off I dunno if I---"

"You bastard."

Kyden gripped what was left of the bones, snapping a few.

"What's wrong?"

"He shouldn't have told you."

"Hey, its OK. I'm not judging you. I was just curious."

"Its not that. Its my responsibility to tell you IF I want to. Not

his."

Kyden threw the bones aside, wiping the bits of meat off his mouth with a sleeve.

"I just feel like a girl and a boy. I always have, ever since I was little. I'm both."

"And so you dress like a woman?"

"Yes."

Vividian wouldn't pretend he understood this. He didn't at all. But he was of the mind that if it made you happy, and you weren't hurting anyone else, who cares?

"It suits you."

He smiled at Kyden,

"You're hotter than most natural born women."

"YOU PERVERT!"

The apprentice went for a swipe, Vividian dodging it, laughing like a moron, running away.

As he ran, he heard Kyden laughing a bit too.

Varnus city came into view days later, its towering walls manned by sentries from the Order of the Drakaangard, a

Knightly Order, Kyden informed Vividian, created during the era of Dragons.

Dragons were extinct, killed off in the War of Embers three hundred years prior under King Elias Merovak of Sentinel's rule. The Drakaangard, however, remained, becoming the elite soldiers of Sentinel's army.

Varnus, once independent, was now a client state of the Merovak dynasty, governed by a cadet branch of said royal family.

"Sounds messy."

Vividian commented as the two rode through the main gate after being inspected by two rough Knights.

"History is rarely anything else but messy."

"Humans are messy."

Kyden smirked, glancing around them as they followed the main street, looking for an Inn or Tavern to set up shop. The Guild, while offering many services, did not offer beds.

And here was the issue.

Kyden didn't know Varnus well, and of course Vividian in his current form didn't know it at all, so the two spent their first two hours in the city wandering its streets looking for a place to stay.

They turned left, then right down walkways, alleys, and streets, getting nowhere. What's more, no one really seemed interested in helping! Their attempts at asking for help fell on deaf ears for the most part.

Finally, after much searching, the two came to Elliot's Inn on East street which, contrary to its name, wasn't east of anything but in central Varnus.

"Thank the Gods."

Vivdian said, hitching his horse to a post outside and hurrying ins.

"Thank the Gods."

Kyden gave the same sentiment but took his time, studying their surroundings carefully just in case. While not crime riddled, Varnus had a reputation for being unsavoury in certain parts of the city, particularly in the center, which was the oldest part, dating back eight hundred years to when Varnus was still a village in the middle of Rudian.

Inside the establishment, a homey place with a blazing fire, oil lamps, and half a dozen patrons drinking mead or eating dinner, the two found the Inn owner at the bar.

Elliot Conwy, a freckled faced human man, red hair thinning in all the wrong places, who gave them a nod and a welcome.

"You two lookin' for a meal, bed, or both?"

"Both."

Vividian said.

"Wait,"

Kyden waved a hand,

"How much for both?"

"Depends on what you want miss. Full room and board for a day comes to one silvers. Two days is three, and a full week is ten."

"How long do you think we'll be here for?"

Vividian asked.

Kyden wasn't sure. The quest they might take could last for weeks if it was in a harsh location. On the other hand, it may take just a few hours.

"We'll take room and board for two days,"

Kyden replied,

"And if we need to we'll book more time."

"Sounds like a plan. Names?"

Conwy pulled out a fat leather book, plopping it down on the counter with a loud thud, flipping it open and scratching down

their first and last names.

"Alrighty. Follow me."

A drunken Dwarf, half sliding off his table, hooted at Kyden as they passed by, other patrons laughing.

"Forgive Gunther,"

Conwy said walking up the stairs,

"He lost his brother Hvelgir a few days ago. Been a wreck ever since."

"its no problem."

Kyden said, and he meant it. He knew what it was like to lose someone, so forgave the Dwarf this momentary slip.

Their room sat at the back end of the Inn, a medium sized thing with two comfy enough beds, a writing desk, and a window overlooking the city.....

Or the buildings facing the Inn at least.

"I hope you enjoy your stay here,"

Elliot bowed,

"If you need anything, please don't hesitate to ask."

"Thank you."

Kyden bowed in turn.

Vividian stood there, wondering what manners he was missing as the Innkeeper closed the door.

"So what now?"

He asked.

Kyden pointed to a bed.

"We sleep. I don't know about you but my body's dying for an actual bed."

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

The two took off their carrying bags, dropping them on the ground, before crawling into their respective beds, asleep in minutes.

They awoke the next morning fully refreshed and energized. Vividian threw on his armour while Kyden spent time getting himself 'dolled up' as Vividan called it, applying the little bit of makeup he put in his travelling bag.

When Kyden emerged, Vivdian took note of the change in clothes. From blouse and skirt Kyden 'graduated' to slim navy blue pants, twin daggers at his side, and a black crock top, hair hanging loose around his face.

"You ready?"

He asked.

Vividian gestured at his new outfit,

"Casual eh?"

"Casual. We're going to be dungeons crawling after all."

"Right. So breakfast first?"

"I'm not a morning eater,"

Kyden headed for the door,

"If you wanna grab a bite go ahead. Meet me outside when you're finished. I'll go to the local Magic shop while you eat."

Vividian agreed, heading out after him and down the stairs, plopping himself down at one of the dozens of tables, surprised at how 'dead' things were now that morning had arrived.

Elliot came out minutes later, looking as though he had had a rough night, forehead creased and eyes hollow looking.

"Hard night?"

Vividan asked as the man came to stand by the table.

"A little."

Elliot muttered.

"Issues with in laws."

"You're a married man?"

"My wife and I recently tied the knot. Her father thinks I'm a waste of space. Anyway, what can I get you sir?"

"Just some eggs if you got any. Some bread to go with it."

"Coming right up."

Elliot went to prepare the food when he stopped,

"Where's the lady you were with?"

"At the local Magic shop, waiting on me there."

"Are you two together?"

"Uh...No, no. Just, uh, business partners I guess you could say."

"I see. Your eggs will be done soon."

Vivdian sat in silence after that, thinking about the day ahead. He didn't figure going into dungeons would be that difficult, Kyden seemed reliable enough and whatever he did in the past he sensed he could use a sword.

The main thing he worried about was taking too long. He wanted to get in and get out as fast as they could since there were other areas he wanted to see.

Elliot brought him his food and he ate quickly, not wanting to keep Kyden waiting long. Once he was done he thanked the

Innkeeper and walked out, finding the Magic shop thanks to a sign with a small wizard wearing blue robes on it.

Entering he found Kyden deep in conversation with the store owner, an elderly Elf.

"....Gems. Inside a cave in eastern Wensmark."

The Elven man looked over to where Vividan stood, giving a half smile.

"Give me a second please sir, I'll be right with you."

"Uhm, I'm actually with---"

"He's with me."

Kyden explained,

"We're partner Collectors for Lorkin."

"I see. Nice to meet you, I'm Arion Anders."

"Vividian Cassender."

He stepped up to the counter, Kyden dropping some red potions into his bag.

"Thanks for the health potions Arion. I'll make sure the old man sends you the coin."

"Take your time. As long as I know its coming I can wait for it. Take care in the dungeon today."

"We will."

With that the Elf turned back to his shelves, Vividian and Kyden leaving the store, mounting their horses and heading for the Guild.

The Mages Guild, or the branch in Varnus, wasn't much to look at truth be told. A tall, straight building constructed with the most basic looking bricks, with few windows and one door.

Vividian stared at it.

"Not as majestic as you thought it would be?"

"No. Its....ugly."

"Well, the Guild doesn't have the money to be posh and prissy."

Kyden slid off his horse, hitching him to a lamp post.

"In the past, a hundred years or so, we did have nice headquarters, but in recent times we got hit hard financially, so we take what we can get."

Vividian did the same with his mount and the two went in, showing Lorkin's paper to the guards before doing so, and once they were in, they were immediately greeted by a crowd of people waiting in line for the front desk.

"Holy sweet shit."

Vividian whispered, trying to peer past someone's shoulder, having little luck.

"Watch your tongue."

"Why?"

Kyden didn't bother clarifying.

"Just don't."

"There's so many people here."

"Collectors come from all over."

"Do all Mages have one?"

"No. Many work independently, selling to whomever pays them enough coin. Lorkin used to deal with those types before you."

"What happened with them?"

Kyden frowned,

"They ripped him off. Gave him half decayed relics or barely working gems. I reasoned with him to stop relying on them."

"What happened then?"

The apprentice looked him over, smirking,

"A hanged man became my babysitting assignment."

"A bit harsh."

"No less true."

The line moved at a snail's pace.

Hardly anyone talked with each other, and Kyden only spoke here and there, mainly to tell Vividian to shut up.

Finally, two hours later, it was their turn.

A middle aged, purple haired Hafling worked the front desk, her gloomy eyes barely looking up at them as they approached.

"How may I assist you today?"

Her voice almost robotic in its dullness.

"We're on business for my master,"

Kyden placed the slip of paper on the desk, leaning forward,

"We need a quest."

"Right away."

The Halfling placed her pen down and walked over to a filling cabinet, pulled out a card, and tossed it towards Kyden.

"There ya go."

"You didn't even look at it."

"I'm not here to hold your hand, Princess."

The Halfling went back to her papers while the two of them went over the quest card.

"A cave in the Northwood is infested with goblins hording Magic gauntlets and holding a girl prisoner."

Vividian read aloud, glancing at the apprentice.

"The Guild handles rescue missions too?"

"Sometimes,"

Kyden nodded,

"What do you think? I say we do it."

"Err..."

"C'mon. You'll do fine. After all,"

He slapped his twin daggers,

"You got Hichimaryu and Kagamaryu at your side."

"You named your weapons?"

"Only a rube doesn't. Come on."

Vivdian's attempt at dissuading Kyden fell on deaf ears, the apprentice walking right past his protests.

He looked up at the celling,

"Gods...please don't let me become a goblin shish kebab. I won't look good tender and juicy."

Sucking up whatever courage he could muster Vividian followed his companion out, gripping hold of his sword the whole way, for luck and comfort.

The Northwood, a section of forest north of Varnus, wasn't any sort of a hot spot for Collectors or adventurers of any kind, but once and awhile, like now, something came up the Guild wanted them to look into.

Unable to ride their horses very far in, Vividian and Kyden were forced to walk much of the way, the apprentice warning his partner to stay vigilant as goblins and Kobolds were known to lurk about the trees, hiding behind them and ambushing unwary passersby.

Kobolds, dog headed humanoids who lived underground most of the time, came up to hunt for meat. Some even raided villages according to old records, though none had been recorded in the last fifty years as far as Kyden was aware.

Goblins were the main threat, however. While Kobolds, after losing enough of their number, backed off and retreated, goblins would continue to attack even as they lacked the

numerical advantage, driven as much by hatred as by bloodlust.

The two reached the cave without incident and entered, instantly feeling the damp coldness on their skin, wishing they'd brought warmer clothes.

Kyden, as the more experienced of the two, led the way, Hichimaryu and Kagamaryu drawn. Vividian had no problem with this, taking up the rear, his Katana at the ready, eyes watchful.

Going deep into the caves, twisting and turning in its dozens of passage ways, the Collector and apprentice spent hours traveling underground, coming across neither monsters nor treasure.

Exhaustion took hold soon after what Kyden guessed was dinner time and the two stopped for the night, kindling a fire in a corner of the tunnel which gave them cover from the main path and Kyden used a spell to cloak the fire's flames so that no one passing by could detect it.

For dinner the two ate simply, with a slice of meat each and water to wash it down.

When the meal was finished Vividian laid back on his bedroll, stretching out his legs, feeling at ease in their environment. Kyden kept watch, not able to be so at ease.

"You ever gonna sleep?"

Vividian asked throwing a blanket over him.

"Maybe in a few hours."

"You'll be a zombie by tomorrow if you don't sleep soon."

"Better undead than totally dead by ambush."

And so Kyden past the night, getting little more than three hours of sleep, on edge for fear a goblin or Kobold might somehow discover their resting place.

By the next morning the two were on the hunt again, pushing forward into the deepest reaches of the cave, and finally coming up against an enemy.

Two goblins, carving up a rat they killed, were blocking the entrance to another passageway as Vividian and Kyden came upon them, one nudging his comrade when he spotted the humans and they sprang to their feet.

A cold block of ice settled in Vividian's stomach, fear washing over his nerves, but he kept his composure.

Kyden launched fully into battle without a second thought, tripping one goblin with a kick, slashing the other in the face with Kagamaryu.

"Get one!"

He shouted back at Vividian, slicing downwards on the goblin's face again before delivering another kick.

Vividian charged in, taking the goblin stunned by Kyden's initial kick off guard, able to drive his sword into the creature's stick thin left leg.

The monster cried out in anguish, Vivdian not letting himself get caught in remorse, pulling it out and chopping down on the goblin's head.

It burst in a perfect cut, cleaving brain and bone.

Vividian looked to see Kyden pouncing on his prey, putting both daggers into the goblin's temples.

Standing up Kyden heaved, nearly out of breath.

He turned to Vividian, giving a genuine smile.

"You did good, for a pervert."

They found the items soon thereafter, but no sign of the girl.

"Where do you think she could be?"

Vividian questioned Kyden as they finished searching that part of the cave.

"Anywhere. The goblins are known to keep women of any race captive for long periods of time. They..."

He didn't finish the sentence, but Vivdian knew exactly what

he meant, feeling sick at the thought.

The two retraced their steps back through the cave, turning down passageways they never took before, Kyden needing to use his Magic to light the way as natural light became practically nonexistent.

In the upper levels the two found a section of the cave which, long ago they guessed, housed a Dwarven mining operation.

Old stone hammers. Metal pickaxes, and runes carved into the cave wall marked their presence.

Kyden ran a hand along the runic letters, closing his eyes as he did so.

"What're you doing?"

"Wait."

This continued for several more minutes, the apprentice walking slowly, fingers touching every symbol.

"The miner who wrote this lived ninety years ago. It commemorates the closing of the mine."

"So this cave used to be occupied by Dwarves?"

"Appears so. Then after they left the goblins and Kobolds took over. Its a regular pattern ----"

A low growl cut Kyden off.

The scrapping of stone came next.

"What was that?"

"Kobold."

"Of course...."

Vividian equipped his sword,

"Two goblins weren't enough."

"Its rarely so easy mate."

Down from them a shadow turned the corner, a large canine head coming into view, eyes a bright blood red.

Shaped like a jackal, the Kobold's face was scarred and filled with grey hairs, a testament of its age. Coming fully around they saw it wore bronze body armour, rust starting to collect on the edges.

"An elder Kobold."

Kyden sighed in frustration.

"Experienced. Well fed. Well trained."

"So...."

"So its the best of the best among its kind."

"Of course it is."

"Enough sarcasm. Stay sharp, don't do anything unnecessary."

Kyden took the lead, stepping cautiously towards the elder Kobold, Hichimaryu and Kagamaryu drawn, held tightly against his chest.

Vividian kept close, taking up Kyden's right flank.

Once they got close enough, the Kobold knocked its head back, letting out a deep howl, echoing across the cave tunnels.

"Shit!"

Kyden tensed.

"What?"

"The thing just called for backup!"

Vividian's heart sank.

They were screwed.

The apprentice's two blades spun and slashed, the Kobold blocking each and every blow with the ease of swatting flies.

In one of his swings Kyden exposed his face accidentally, the Kobold elder exploiting it, smashing a fist into it.

Kyden let out a scream, flying back into the wall, making a sickening thud as he hit and dropped to the cave floor.

"Oh crap!"

Vivdian attempted to go to the apprentice, the Kobold blocking his path with its own savage attacks.

"Kyden!"

He got no response.

"Hey! Get the hell up!"

He didn't respond.

"Dammit!"

Calling on reserves of strength Vividian bull rushed the Kobold, knocking it off balance long enough to reach Kyden, wrap his arms about the apprentice's waist, and haul him off, racing towards the cave exit.

"I'm sorry."

Vivdian said,

"We tried to save you."

He heard the goblins and Kobolds running down and up their respective tunnels, their feet and weapons dragging dirt and clanking.

Just as some appeared he escaped the cave and forced himself to run for their horses, throwing Kyden on his, gripping the other horse' reins, and riding hard back to Varnus.

Chapter 3

"She hit her head hard,"

The doctor said examining Kyden,

"But luckily she doesn't appear to have sustained any serious damage. It just knocked her unconscious. She should wake in a few hours."

"Thank you doctor."

Vividian bowed in thanks, handing him what coin they had.

The doctor refused it,

"No need. Use that to get yourself a hot meal son."

When the doctor left their room Vividian took a seat beside Kyden's bed, watching over him as he 'slept'.

He did his best not to dwell on the girl left behind in the Northwood cave. He had no choice in retreating, to do anything else meant they'd die.

Still, knowing she was back there with those monsters, knowing they had a chance to save her but couldn't, made him feel terrible.

It was possible another Collector would take up the quest but by then it may be too late.

It all happened so fast. The Kobold appeared suddenly, able to utilize its experience against them so easily, and now Kyden....

He hardly knew him but had grown to like him a lot.

"You'll be fine."

Vividian whispered under his breath, patting Kyden's hand,

"You'll be fine."

He thought about writing Lorkin, but didn't know what to tell him about Kyden's condition. There was no sense in worrying the older man if his apprentice would make a full recovery like the doctor assumed.

But, what if something unexpected happened?

"Dammit."

Vividian rubbed his cheek,

"What should I do?"

There was no clear answer. There were pros and cons to both sides of this coin.

Eventually he decided Lorkin deserved to know regardless if Kyden would be fine or not, and quickly dashed off a letter, sending it to Elliot who walked over and put it in the mail for

him.

Then, he waited for Kyden to wake up.

It took a week.

The day he awoke Vividian was cleaning his sword, using a polishing solution Elliot lent him. He was sitting beside the bed when he felt a soft hand tug at his sleeve.

"How...How long have I been out?"

Taken by surprise Vividian leaped up from his chair, swinging around ready to strike, only to see Kyden looking at him, eyes half closed, a small frown on his face.

"Easy tiger,"

Kyden said,

"Don't hurt yourself."

"Thank the Gods you're finally up."

Vividian slid back onto his seat, taking hold of Kyden's hand.

The apprentice didn't pull away.

"How do you feel?"

"My head feels like I got stomped by a minotaur,"

Kyden winced,

"And my throat is drier than a dead plant. But, other than that, pretty peachy."

"Even ill you can't stop the sarcasm."

"Its what everyone loves about me. That and my cuteness."

Vividian let go of Kyden's hand and went downstairs, grabbing a cup of water and a bit of bread before going back up.

Kyden ate slowly, taking sips of the water here and there.

"Why did you save me?"

He asked in between mouthfuls.

"What do you mean?"

"You could've left me and saved yourself. Why didn't you?"

Vividian, puzzled by this, shook his head.

"What're you talking about? Why would I leave you for those things to kill?"

"It was the sensible thing."

Kyden drank more of his water.

"You should've focused on yourself."

"We're in this together,"

Vividian said back,

"And that means not leaving each other behind, no matter the risks."

He saw Kyden struggled with that concept. His general apathy towards people evident here.

"Its strange."

Kyden said,

"Most people would run, wouldn't even feel that bad afterwards. You stayed and helped me."

"Maybe your opinions about people are wrong."

"I won't dignify that with a response."

He finished up his bread and water.

"What happened to the girl?"

This hit Vividian hard. He took a moment to respond.

"A day after we came back a party of Mages went in to recover her. One member lost her life, and when the remaining adventurers found the girl, there wasn't much left."

Kyden grimaced.

"Did you bring back the items?"

"I did."

"At least that wasn't wasted."

"A girl's dead."

"Its a shame,"

Kyden sighed,

"But if we lost both, we'd have accomplished nothing. I'm not pleased with her death, especially at how she met it, but dwelling on it won't bring her back or make you better at your new profession."

"Neither will being cold."

"True."

Lifting the blankets Kyden gingerly rose from bed, waving off Vividian's attempts to help, easing himself upright, taking deep breathes against the pain.

"Lying in bed was never my thing,"

He said between clenched teeth,

"I'd rather work off the pain than wallow in it."

"The doctor said you needed rest, Kyden."

"I'm sure he did."

He ignored Vividian's protests, swatting back his hands, and got to his feet.

"Argh."

He whimpered, holding his head.

"Feels like its split in certain places."

"You did hit it pretty hard."

"Yeah, I can imagine. Kobolds are no joke."

Taking things step by step the apprentice made his way to the door and gradually downstairs where he hoped to have more food. Vividian followed to keep an eye on him, offering a hand whenever he felt Kyden needed it.

Elliot made them eggs and Vividian read out portions of a letter from Lorkin that arrived a day earlier.

The old man admonished them for being reckless, charging in 'half cocked' as he put with many exclamation points.

Lorkin stressed the items meant nothing if Kyden didn't return safely. He ended the letter by asking Vividian to keep him updated.

"Sounds like we gave him quite the scare."

Vividian said putting the letter back into his pocket.

"My master gets worked up easily."

"You could've died. I wouldn't call that getting 'worked up' easily."

"Maybe."

"Its not."

"OK."

Kyden smiled, this time it wasn't sarcastic or with a hint of displeasure, but a genuine one. Vividian wished he'd do that more, it was so much better than the cynical side he always seemed to show.

"We should head back to Sentinel after we eat. I'm sure my master will have a new job for us in a few days."

"How can you think of working after what just happened?"

"If I don't work, I get antsy."

"So....you're a workaholic?"

"Better than being a lazy bum."

Kyden polished off the rest of his eggs in silence. It was clear he was thinking of things, that Vividian was positive of, but what?

He didn't ask, both due to not wanting to be rude and, he guessed, his partner wasn't likely to tell him even if he did.

Elliot swung by in between delivering meals to other patrons, asking how Kyden was, saying he was thankful she survived, and stating he hoped they stay for at least one more day as he

enjoyed their company.

But Kyden declined. Sentinel called.

So, paying their bill the two packed their bags and headed for home, arriving in Sentinel four days later, Lorkin relieved to see them, the old Mage throwing his arms around Kyden like he was a long lost puppy finally come home.

For the next week and a half the old Mage wouldn't let them do anything, convinced Kyden wasn't up for it, no matter how much protests he put up or called Lorkin a 'cruster with no brain.'

So, lacking any meaningful jobs, he spent time doing something he'd wanted to do for some time.

Look into Vividian's background and find out just who he was before he became their Collector.

He started at the archive, Sentinel's largest library created twenty years before by Princess Dana, an elderly member of the royal family who loved books and wanted to share that joy with the rest of the city.

Over the years court documents, genealogies, law codes, and other records found their way there where the common man could read them.

Kyden dived right in, going over court cases and convicted

murderers sentenced to death. Vividian, off on his own doing Gods knew what, wouldn't know and Kyden already promised himself he wouldn't reveal anything unless he knew for sure.

Hours past as he shifted through the records, reading the names of countless men and women, dead or about to be, finding nothing about V.

Then, on the fifth hour mark, he hit pay dirt.

One Balthazar Halter, arrested for the murder of Lady Julianna Bray, was executed by hanging but his body disappeared before it could be burnt.

Kyden put down the records, staring into the candlelight. Now that he had his name, he could begin tracing Balthazar back to his family.

But, as he soon learned, this was anything but simple.

First of all, there were hardly any Halters in Sentinel, forcing Kyden to search long sections of genealogies.

Second of all, the documents that contained the Halter family was placed high up on a shelf, sending him to find the librarian who, shall we say, wasn't too happy being interrupted for 'hobbyist genealogy' as she rudely put it.

But, she got the box and handed it to Kyden, who promptly went back to studying.

When he finally found his match he nearly jumped for joy.

Balthazar Halter was born twenty nine years ago, according to what Kyden read, the son of potter Andreas Halter and his wife, Christiana Wolfe.

His parents died in a fire when Balthazar was eight, and he was taken in by an uncle Randall Wolfe, who saw to his education and upkeep.

After he graduated from school, Balthazar disappeared from records, popping up only twice more, both as a criminal connected to highway robbery.

No one was killed, and from testimony from the victims, the robber acted 'respectfully and without malice.'

A far cry from a killer, Kyden noted.

Following this came the conviction for the murder of Julianna Bray. Of course, as it later came to light, the Lady was mauled by a wild animal while out riding alone. But officials, already having Halter in custody, refused to let him go and used him as a scapegoat.

"Untrustworthy bastards."

Kyden placed all the papers back into the box and handed them to the librarian as he walked out.

"Riveting reading!"

He grinned.

She scowled back.

Later that night while sharing a meal with his master and Vividian, Kyden decided to inform them who V really was, knowing full well that when his master went to the execution it was a spur of the moment decision, knowing little to nothing about the case besides the fact the man was innocent, thanks to overhearing a conversation between guards.

"Hey,"

He tapped Vividian's hand.

"Hmm?"

His mouth was full of salted potatoes.

"I know who you are."

Vividian swallowed. Looked confused.

"Uh...I would hope so. We fought together and---"

"No fool, I meant I know who you were BEFORE."

Both Lorkin and Vividian put their forks down.

"What?"

"I went to the Sentinel archive, did some digging, and found

out who they say murdered Julianna Bray. It was a highwayman named Balthazar Halter."

"Balthazar Halter?"

Vividian said the name like he was hearing a foreign language. It didn't register at all.

"Yup. Balthazar Halter, son of Andreas and Christiana. I never pictured you as a thief, but you were one once upon a time."

"It doesn't matter now, my boy,"

Lorkin patted Vividian on the arm,

"What matters now is who you with us. Balthazar Halter is dead. You are Vividian Cassender now."

Vividian nodded, but his face betrayed his uncertainty.

"A highwayman."

He said the word with a hint of disgust.

"It makes sense,"

Kyden flicked his fork V's way,

"It explains how you knew howda fight right? I thought you could be a soldier, but this makes perfect sense too."

"Yes."

Vividian agreed but wasn't happy about it.

"Regardless of who you were, you are Vividian now. As such,"

Lorkin said wiping off steak juices,

"I have a new job for you two. No Guild this time."

"What is it master?"

"There's an old Dragon burial ground in the southeast, called by the locals as the Old Dragon Yard, said to hold Magic power. I want you and Vividian to go get some of those bones for me."

"Heh?"

Kyden thought the old man was joking.

But he wasn't.

"Go get some Dragon bones."

He said again, serious this time.

"Why? They're dead."

"Don't you ever listen to my lectures boy? Goodness gracious. I raised a simpleton. Dragons were creatures of Magic. Even in death their bones contain Magical energy that I can use for study. Understand now my young, dumb apprentice?"

"Crystal clear you bastard."

Vividian couldn't hold back his laughter, sprinkles of potatoes

flying as he let loose.

Kyden and Lorkin joined in, all having a good laugh.

Chapter 4

The Old Dragon Yard was to be found outside the small city of Dreyden, a new kid on the block as far as cities were concerned, only being ten years old.

However, the ruling family of Dreyden, the Mordrents, had lived in the southeast for three centuries, first as common landlords, then through the smart business mind of Jadus Mordrent two hundred years ago, they became Barons.

The current head of the Mordrent Clan, Tomas Mordrent, was Baron of Dreyden and a Knight of the Drakaangard.

Lorkin swore he knew him personally and that he would write a letter of introduction for Vividian and Kyden so they could receive noble help in their latest quest.

Kyden wasn't convinced, telling V to not expect much.

Lorkin told him to go stuff himself.

When the letter was written and the two outfitted, they set

off for Dreyden, this time the old man joining them, against his apprentice's wishes.

Lorkin wanted to rub it in his pupil's face personally when it became clear he did know Tomas Mordrent, passing on such an opportunity was nonsense he eagerly told his Collector and apprentice.

So the three rode together, taking turns standing guard at night as they travelled the highways and roads, stopping at roadside taverns whenever possible, even taking up residence in an abandoned house on the outskirts of a ghost town when needed.

They reached Dreyden two weeks after setting off, cresting the hill overlooking the city just as the sun was beginning to rise, giving the skies above it an orangish red colour.

"Behold,"

Lorkin pointed,

"Dreyden, city of the Mordrents."

"Almost time to introduce us to your buddy."

Kyden smirked at the Mage.

Lorkin smiled smugly back,

"Ohhhh boy! I can't wait to see that cocky look wiped off your

face. C'mon, lets go see Tommy."

Valis dashed off down the hill, excitedly whooping.

Vividian and Kyden gave each other an amused look before following the older man.

Unlike Varnus where they got lost, in Dreyden under Lorkin's care the two companions made it to the Baron's castle in a timely manner, proving that Lorkin knew the city if not Mordrent.

Built of solid mountain stone, Mordrant castle was miles high, by far towering over every other building in Dreyden and, if Vividian had to guess, it could house most of the city's residence in a very tight pinch.

A banner hung down from the black iron portcullis portraying a golden arm holding a sword high with the words "Conquer Or Die' written underneath.

The Mordrent family motto.

"We're here to see Lord Mordrent!"

Lorkin called out to the Knights on sentry duty.

They stared down at him like he was an insect.

"You must be mistaken friend,"

One of the Knights said, his voice hard edged,

"Our master wouldn't wanna see someone like you."

Kyden glanced at Vividian, holding back his 'I told you so' look.

"Good sirs,"

Lorkin called back,

"I am one of the Lord's closest friends. My name's Lorkin Valis. Go tell him I wish to see him. I'm sure he'll let us through."

The hard edged Knight grunted an order to his fellow sentry standing beside him who went off immediately.

He returned twenty minutes later, an skinny white bearded man following him back, dressed in a big black bear coat.

"This man says he knows y----"

"Lorkin! By the Gods it is you!"

Tomas Mordrent pushed by the grumpy Knight, hanging over the riling.

"I thought Renning was just pulling my leg but you're here!"

Lorkin turned in the saddle deliberately, giving Kyden the biggest smile he possibly could.

Lord Mordrent ordered the portcullis to be opened so they could enter, Lorkin boasting how Kyden was wrong the entire

ride in.

The Baron led his old friend and his 'tag alongs' as Lorkin teasingly called V and Kyden, into the castle proper, ordering servants to fetch the wine and prepare a lavish meal for his esteemed guests.

Leading them into his private chambers where Vividian was instantly struck by just how fancy everything was, from the curtains to the paintings on the wall, every item was of top quality and highlighted Mordrent's financial and societal status.

"How did the old man ever befriend him?"

Vividian asked Kyden, bending close to whisper into his ear.

"Beats me. I'm just as confused as you."

"Lorkin, its been ages since you've been here. What kept you away?"

Mordrent poured each a cup of blueberry wine, their drinking vessels golden, though whether it was true gold V didn't know.

"My craft, what else?"

Lorkin sucked back his drink and held the cup out for more. Mordrent happy to oblige.

"I've been studying Magic, testing things out. Hard to find the time to visit."

"Kyden's big now,"

Mordrent gave a friendly smile towards him, gesturing up and down with a hand to empathize his point.

"Last time you told me about him, he was no bigger than a Dwarf."

"Still a pain in my ass."

Lorkin chortled, downing more alcohol.

"Without me, you woulda fried that potato brain of yours, old man."

"Got a tongue on him too,"

Mordrent said approvingly. His eyes finding Vividian next, suddenly widening.

"And necromancy is the Magic you've been studying?"

All three stopped drinking and stared at the Baron, V's heart quickening.

He knew.

He knew!

"Balthazar Halter. The supposed killer of Julianna Bray,

resurrected as a tool for you Lorkin?"

Mordrent's voice betrayed admiration more than disgust or disappointment. Three servants brought in a cart filled with steaming plates of food consisting of spice covered meats and green leafed vegetables.

"Sit down my friends, let us discuss this as we dine."

Feeling like he had no choice either way Vividian followed the Baron's instructions, finding a place at the table as far away from Mordrent as possible.

Kyden took the chair next to him, Lorkin sat by the Baron, seemingly unconcerned that the man knew Vividian's identity in his past life.

The servants served them their portions and retreated from the room. With them gone, the nobleman went on, asking question upon question, letting it be known almost at once he knew Vividian was innocent---

But, Dark Magic such as necromancy was forbidden.

Lorkin knew this, the Baron admonished him.

"Sure, sure,"

The Mage waved a hand away,

"But its not like he came back a zombie or a Demon right?"

"I'm surprised Belus would sanction it."

"He has no idea."

To this Tomas grunted. His friendly tone and manner shifting to one of uneasiness, almost hostile.

Kyden and Vividian sensed it, but Lorkin again seemed not too.

The Baron didn't keep up the conversation much after this, only asking things here and there, casual chat, something two strangers may partake in.

But, for reasons known only to him, Lorkin wasn't bothered by this sudden change, he just kept yammering on, stuffing pieces of meat into his mouth and knocking back alcohol.

The Dragon burial ground came up a few times, Tomas warning him away from it, saying bandits controlled the region around it now, but the Mage chuckled and dismissed him.

By the end of the meal the Baron stood up, using a napkin to wipe away meat juice from his chin, mood somewhat better.

"It was a delightful dinner,"

He said, giving a weak smile,

"I'd like you to stay the night. Its too late to travel to the

Dragon Yard now. Stay here for the night and tomorrow I'll send an escort with you."

"Nonsense!"

Lorkin shot up, energized from the food, signalling for Kyden and Vividian to follow him,

"We'd hate to be a burden. Bandits aren't any concern for us."

Mordrent insisted, but the old man would hear no more of it and the three of them left Dreyden soon afterward, riding out towards the burial ground.

The Baron waited half an hour before leading a squad of Drakangaard Knights to bring Vividian back to be executed again like the abomination he was.

Lorkin and Kyden were to be killed on sight.

Kyden stoked the campfire with a piece of broken bark he found along the roadside, watching the stars twinkle above as V and the old man slept underneath the trees.

The crisp smoke made him cough a bit, the coal like taste making him spit a few times. Vividian and he had played rock paper scissors to see who would stand guard for the first three hours.

Of course he chose scissors, a bad habit, and Vividian's rock smashed it to bloody pieces.

So here he was, ass cramped on a log, watching stars while time slowly ticked by.

His luck sucked.

Nudging a coal with his bark stick Kyden blinked sleep away, cracking his neck as he fought to keep awake, almost missing the rustling in the distance.

On reflex Hichimaryu and Kagamaryu were in his hands at once, though he sat still otherwise.

"Get up."

He said quietly to Lorkin and V.

"Get up."

"What? Please don't interrupt my sleep for some st---"

"Get up or you're dead, you dumbass."

Vividian reacted faster than the old Mage, Katana sliding out of its sheath as the Collector rose from his bedroll.

"What's wrong?"

He asked. Kyden pointed into the forest around them.

"Rustling. Foot steps."

"Bandits?"

"Maybe. That's my guess."

"Bandits? She called us bandits!"

A roar of laughter erupted across the woods, Kyden's fingers tightening on his daggers.

"That two faced asshole. Its Mordrent."

"What?"

"He's come for you,"

Kyden said without hesitation,

"We saw it on his face at dinner remember? We should've known he'd do this. Hey old man! Get up!"

Lorkin finally rose, cranky and grumbling.

"Shut up and grab a weapon! Your 'friend' is here to see us."

"Huh?"

Kyden didn't bother responding further, focusing his attention on the trees.

Dozens of Knights on horseback emerged suddenly, the Baron at their head in silver armour.

"Surrender."

He ordered.

"I won't spare you, but your deaths will be swift."

"I appreciate the honesty, 'Lord'."

Kyden stood up, knowing who his first target would be.

"Lorkin,"

Mordrant directed his sword towards the old Mage,

"You crossed a line even friendship can't protect you from. For what its worth, this isn't personal."

"Oh balls it isn't! Just come on then,"

Lorkin held his arms out, lightning crackling from his fingertips,

"I'll gladly resurrect you once this is over."

"Take them! Spare the abomination."

Horse hooves pounded the forest floor, armoured bodies charging towards Kyden at high speed.

Thinking fast he used a blast of Magic to send himself up into the air as one Knight came at him, using Kagamaryu to slice through his visor, slashing open his eyeballs.

The man screamed in high pitched agony, blood squeezing out of his helmet, covering its silver red. Thus blinded the Knight

was electrocuted by Lorkin, who then caused a surge of energy to rip into nearby horsemen, cooking both mounts and soldiers inside out in seconds.

Vividian ran one horse through, bringing down his rider. He leaped on the man's chest, busting bones before driving his blade into his visor slit, just managing to push it through, pinning the man to the ground.

More Knights swarmed them, enraged by their comrade' slaughter. Kyden continued to use his Magic to give him an edge, slowly burning himself out, his daggers turning several of Mordrent's men into corpses.

Lorkin's spells switched from lightning to pure energy spells, plucking Knights off their mounts like he was using chopsticks and hurling them miles above the trees, landing Gods only knew where.

But he couldn't keep it up forever, his body beginning to wear down even as he was at his most potent.

Kyden saw this and made his way to him, driving Hichimaryu through a Knight's exposed neck who blocked his path.

As Lorkin stumbled his apprentice pushed his back up against the Mage's, holding him up.

"Remind me when we get out of this to make sure your fool ass don't make such wonderful types of friends again."

"Will do."

Lorkin laughed, gripping Kyden's hand, squeezing it.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For everything boy."

To Kyden's right he saw V kick a Knight down again, the man's right arm missing, and decapitating him.

The Baron, off in the distance, watched the battle unfold, doing nothing as his men died, only glaring at the failures he called Knights.

"Coward."

Kyden spat, jabbing Hichimaryu at Mordrent.

"Face us yourself! Earn that title!"

Mordrent said nothing. Made no move.

Another one of the Dreyden Knights came at the apprentice and his master, Kyden going low under a swing and driving one of his daggers into the man's neck.

Down to four men now, Kyden and Lorkin were exhausted, both breathing loudly, heavily. Vividian fought without a care, boundless energy thanks to his undead nature.

"Go."

He looked back to the two.

"Go now. I'll hold them."

"Stop being stupid."

Kyden said,

"We're in this together."

"Go."

Vividian sliced a Knight's leg off, silencing the cries with a boot to the man's throat.

"What part of 'in this together' do you not get?"

Kyden helped Lorkin to a tree, setting the old one down before turning his attention back to the fight.

Too tired to run, he did the next best thing.

He took Hichimaryu and Kagamaryu and threw them, casting the last ounce of Magic he had on them as they flew, ensuring they hit their targets.

Leaving just one Knight left besides Mordrent, which Vividian quickly dispatched.

With his men all dead the Baron had no nerve left to fight, cursing under his breath and withdrawing back into the forest.

Not believing their luck Kyden fell to his knees, laughing in surprise.

"We did it. We actually did it!"

Vividian helped him up.

"Can you believe it?"

He asked again, taking his face in his hands,

"We survived that."

Kyden rested his head on V's shoulder, hugging him close.

"I thought for sure we were done."

"So did I."

"Hey old man, you're lucky we're fond of you. Otherwise we'da left your ass to the Baron."

Kyden listened to V's breathing as he waited for Lorkin's sarcastic response.

The old Mage said nothing.

"Hey, old man, you gonna give us words of wisdom?"

He let Vividian go, turning back to the tree.

Lorkin looked like he was sleeping. Head down. Eyes closed.

"Master?"

Kyden's hands started to tremble.

Vividian walked over to Lorkin, going down on one knee, fingers gently touching his neck.

He left them there for a few seconds before pulling away, eyes searching the ground.

"He's gone."

"What?"

"He's dead."

"Don't say something so stupid!"

Kyden came over, shoving V out of the way and pressed his own hand to Lorkin's neck.

No pulse. The old Mage's chest was still.

"Master...."

He said weakly.

Vividian checked Lorkin over for wounds, but found nothing.

"His heart must've given out."

Vividian said crouching beside the apprentice.

Kyden tried to speak but his words were choked.

Vividian hugged him, and Kyden buried his face into his

friend's shoulders, unable to fight his tears any longer.

They buried Lorkin underneath the tree where he died, Vividian digging the grave more so than Kyden, who kept breaking down.

It took them until morning, already exhausted from the fight with Mordrent's Knights.

Bloodied, clothes sweat stained and torn, the two placed Lorkin in the grave, Vividian saying a few prayers he heard a priest say at a funeral he passed once.

Kyden listened silently, eyelids buffy, throat sore. He didn't know what he'd do now, where he'd go. In a matter of minutes his whole life was destroyed.

Lorkin raised him since he was a little boy, was the closest thing to a father he ever knew and the old man did his best even with all his eccentricities.

He loved him in his own way and Kyden loved him.

"May the Gods welcome you in paradise."

Vividian finished up the prayer and began filling in the hole.

Kyden couldn't watch and turned away, he looked at the bodies around them, frozen in different death poses.

Some gripped their throats, others laid flat on their backs, sightless eyes staring up into the newly dawned blue sky.

A day ago, he thought, they were alive. Laughing, eating, drinking, loving.

Now they were dead. All those memories vanished forever from the world, and Gods knew how many loved ones they left behind.

A part of him wanted to hate them, to despise them for what they did, but his rational side won over. These men served Mordrent, their Lord and master, just like he served Lorkin.

For them it was probably a position they inherited from a mother or father, their families vassals to the Mordrent Barony for generations, if not centuries.

No, his hatred should only be reserved for the man who dared call himself Lorkin's friend.

Kyden's fingers ran over Hichimaryu.

He swore to kill Tomas Mordrent, he didn't care how long it took, or what became of him.

He would end the bastard's life.

"What're we going to do?"

Vividian asked coming up behind him.

"Where do we go from here?"

Kyden let go of Hichimaryu and spun to face V,

"Its obvious."

"What do you mean?"

"Killing Tomas Mordrent."

"Lorkin wouldn't want that."

Kyden threw a finger in his face,

"Don't tell me what Lorkin would or wouldn't want. The man's dead because of that asshole!"

Vividian gently pushed Kyden's hand down, holding it in his. The contrast between their moods was striking. V was hurt emotionally and physically but he chose to remain calm, where Kyden was consumed by hatred and anger.

"He is. But you know how he was Kyden. Lorkin never wasted a thought on petty things like that. He'd want us to continue his research if anything. Not waste our days away hunting the Baron."

"What the hell do you know?"

Kyden shoved him hard, Vividian staggering.

"You barely knew him! You're only alive because he took pity on you, you dumb walking---"

He held his tongue, just barely catching himself before he said 'walking corpse'.

Vividian frowned.

"I may have only known him a short time,"

V admitted,

"But it was enough to get a sense of what kind of man he was. Lorkin dedicated himself to the study of Magic and the world at large. Revenge didn't cross his mind, it got in the way of his studies."

Unsure what to say, Kyden stared at the ground. He didn't want to hurt V's feelings again, but his anger burned hot, it made it hard to control his mouth, he spoke before he thought.

"I'm sorry."

He said finally.

"I...I don't think that of you...I'm sorry."

Vividian told him not to worry about it, he understood.

"We should go back to Sentinel."

"No."

Kyden shook his head, a determined look on his face,

"I meant what I said about Mordrent. I'm going to kill him."

"Ky---"

"Listen. I don't expect you to help. You're free to live your life however you want from here on, but for me there is no other way until he's dead."

The apprentice turned and headed for his horse, snatching up his items bag as he walked.

Vividian watched him go.

"Wait."

V grabbed his bag, swearing they'd regret this, and went to his mount, agreeing to go with Kyden.

"You don't need to."

"I know, but what sort of friend would I be if I let you do this stupid thing alone?"

"I never knew we were friends."

Kyden smirked taking up the reins.

"Sure you didn't, smartass."

Vividian swung up onto his horse and gently kneed her, leading the way back to Dreyden.

In Mordrent's city the two bidded their time, finding lodgings in a run down Inn near the lower end of town, holding up there as they planned their next move.

Vividian was adamant that a frontal assault would be suicide. They may get past the first few guards but they'd be swarmed and killed soon after.

Kyden, as much as he hated admitting it, knew he was right. There were better ways inside the castle.

The thing was, it took them weeks to figure out a plan.

And it never even involved going inside the castle.

The Baron, convinced the apprentice and his undead friend ran after their clash in the forest, turned his mind to other matters, accepting an invitation from Sentinel's King to attend a banquet in the Queen's honour.

Word reached Kyden about this while he stalked the vendor stalls looking for any scrap of information they could use.

When he returned to the Tavern he and V quickly drew up a plan.

Mordrent needed to pass through the same forest they fought in, and it would be there, a few miles down the path from where Lorkin was buried, they would strike.

Leaving Dreyden the night before the Baron was supposed to

depart Vividian and Kyden set up positions up in the trees along the path.

On the day of action, everything fell into place.

Tomas Mordrent and twenty Knights rode through the forest wearing their best colours. Banners of the House of Mordrent, held high in pride, were more numerous than men, a sign of Tomas's vanity.

Kyden couldn't help but relish the moment, the Baron's misplaced confidence in his own power and importance soon to be his downfall.

When the line of horsemen reached them Kyden asked the Gods for forgiveness for the poor animals who were about to be harmed and then summoned all of his Magic, concentrating it into one major spell.

Tearing the trees from the ground he smashed them into the horses, killing animal and rider instantly in a chaotic display of power.

Dirt, leaves, and branches flew up into the air, blood and mashed body parts joining them.

Vividian, a protective spell around him, jumped down into the bloodbath, cutting his way through with his Katana, contributing to the death toll.

Soon none lived save the Baron, who sat motionless on his horse, powerless to stop the mayhem before his eyes.

In the spur of the moment decision he tried to flee, kicking his horse hard in the ribs, but Kyden was waiting for this, reaching out with his last remaining bit of Magic and gripping the man's neck, ripping him off his saddle and onto the ground.

As Mordrent floundered, trying to catch his bearings, Kyden leaped to the forest floor, Hichimaryu and Kagamaryu at the ready, marching towards his prey.

Mordrent, dazed, fought to stand up, body refusing to comply. Kyden reached him, stomping on a leg in the middle of pressing on soft dirt....

The snap of bone was sickening.

Mordrent screamed, hands wrapping around the shattered limb on instinct, he fell to the ground again.

Kyden continued his revenge, stomping on Mordrent's other leg, breaking his knee cap.

Vividian stood back, letting his friend do what he needed to do, the Collector not having the stomach for it.

"Do you---"

SMASH.

Kyden kicked Tomas in the face, silencing him.

"You foo---"

Another kick cut him off, lips busted.

Kyden went for his nose next, his fist twisting it, cracking it, leaving the thing deformed.

Despite his broken limbs the Baron tried rising, choking on the blood running down his throat, what words he managed to utter making little sense.

Kyden pushed him down, straddling him.

Hichimaryu and Kagamaryu went to work.

Their blades, by the end, were covered in bits of flesh, eye tissue, and white brain matter, Kyden mutilating Mordrent beyond recognition.

When he finished he rolled off the body, heaving for breath, his anger draining and giving way to sadness again.

V approached and sat down with him.

For what seemed like hours the two sat in silence, no words needing to be spoken. What was there to be said?

Finally Vividian looked up at the sky, a bright blue.

"We should go."

He said,

"Somewhere away from Sentinel. Start a new life."

"Doing what?"

"Whatever we want."

Kyden sheathed his daggers, hands sore.

He flexed them, sighing at the pain.

"I'm not good for anything."

"You're a good friend....and a good son."

Vividian put his hand on Kyden's,

"You're a good person. That's hard to find."

Kyden smiled, closing his eyes.

"Let's go."

The two got up and left the forest, ready to go wherever life would take them next.